

Act Four

Opinion: The CIA funded a culture war against communism. It should do so again.



Lakeith Stanfield stars as Cassius Green in director Boots Riley's "Sorry to Bother You." (Annapurna Pictures)



Opinion by Sonny Bunch

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Earlier this month, "Sorry to Bother You" director Boots Riley [tweeted](#), "Art for arts [sic] sake is never for arts [sic] sake—it's for the sake of the status quo. This is why the CIA funded Jackson Pollack [sic]." Set aside the vaguely totalitarian suggestion that art must, by its nature, exist either in support of or opposition to the political establishment. Today, I'd like to focus on the CIA's involvement in the Cold War's culture war and think back to a better time, when ideas were taken seriously and art was considered transformative — and keep in mind the ways in which the agency could help artists struggling to break through overseas today.

Those interested in the CIA's covert cultural war should check out "[Who Paid the Piper?](#)" by Frances Stonor Saunders. Granted, it's an unrelentingly negative portrayal of the efforts by Michael Josselson, Nicolas Nabokov and others to funnel money from the CIA into the hands of artists and intellectual journals that highlighted the Western world's commitment to individual freedom. But if you can set aside the author's biases, you'll discover a fascinatingly byzantine effort to turn the world to the American way of thinking via pen and paint rather than munitions and murder.

The CIA at its founding was largely run by Ivy Leaguers, would-be highbrows and intellectuals. It makes sense that they'd have been attracted to the ideas of men like Melvin Lasky, the consummate Cold Warrior who pushed for the founding of a magazine designed to bridge the gap between the West and the rest. According to a postwar memo by Lasky submitted to the U.S. Army, journals like Der Monat would serve "as a demonstration that behind the official representatives of American democracy lies a great and progressive culture, with a richness of achievements in the arts, in literature, in philosophy, in all the aspects of culture which unite the free traditions of Europe and America."

Magazines like Der Monat and English-American literary-political journal Encounter were not the only activities supported by nonprofit pass-throughs such as the Farfield

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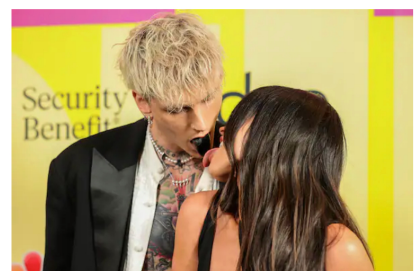
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were not the only activities supported by nonprofit pass-throughs such as the Tanner Foundation and the Ford Foundation. The CIA-backed Congress for Cultural Freedom brought the Boston Symphony to Europe (at the cost of \$166,359.84, according to Saunders) and sprang for publication and distribution of “at least a thousand books,” [according to a 1977 report](#) in the New York Times. The books included translations of T.S. Eliot’s poems, Boris Pasternak’s “Doctor Zhivago” and Machiavelli’s “The Prince,” according to Saunders.

And, yes, there was support for abstract art of the sort championed by Pollock. “On display will be masterpieces that could not have been created nor whose exhibition would be allowed by such totalitarian regimes as Nazi Germany or present-day Soviet Russia and her satellites,” bragged Museum of Modern Art advisory committee member James Johnson Sweeney about an exhibit there. While the Soviets were stuck producing realist works of art dedicated to illustrating the glories of the latest five-year plan, American artists were free to pursue whatever vision they chose — even if that vision was denounced by some conservative legislators as “anti-American.” Amusingly, there was no better demonstration of the West’s commitment to freedom than the fact that members of Congress could condemn abstract art as wicked and do nothing to stop its dissemination.

The CIA remains fond of abstract art; Carey Dunne [highlighted the agency’s Melzac Collection](#) at the George Bush Center for Intelligence two years ago for Hyperallergic. Canvases filled with lines and dots and swirls still hang on the agency’s walls, a testament to triumphs past.

But the moving picture remains the most visceral and, perhaps more important, *accessible* art form. As Saunders notes in her book, the United States has long worked to up the number of films accepted in foreign markets through trade deals. Others have taken a more guerrilla approach to spreading the cinematic gospel; consider efforts by the Human Rights Foundation to raise awareness of the Kim Jong Un-mocking film, “The Interview,” in North Korea [via balloon](#).

Which brings me to back Riley and “Sorry to Bother You.” The director has in recent weeks [complained](#) of not being able to obtain foreign distribution for his [entertaining new picture](#). This is understandable (indies often have such troubles) but unfortunate. The movie’s messages would resonate in China, the world’s second-largest market. After all, “Sorry to Bother You’s” WorryFree corporation — which houses and feeds workers in factories to increase productivity — seems a [dead ringer for Foxconn](#), the “forbidden city” where Chinese workers manufacture Apple devices. The movie’s messages might appeal to people in a nation where [poets](#) and [artists](#) and [activists](#) are imprisoned for bucking the leadership’s diktats.

If the CIA were looking for a way to have some fun in the cultural space, they could do worse than distributing Riley’s opus: Commission a top-shelf translation for the subtitles, bang out some samizdat DVDs, and upload the film to as many file sharing and streaming services as possible. How better to demonstrate the unfettered freedom artists have in America to criticize the system? “Sorry to Bother You” might even spur Chinese citizens to take action against the Communist Party-backed businesses that dominate commerce in the state.

Naturally, any efforts by the CIA in such matters should remain quiet; one wouldn’t want to put the artists behind the film in the awkward position of knowingly benefiting from the CIA’s largesse. But a little subterfuge is a small price to pay in service of winning the culture wars.

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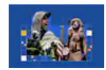
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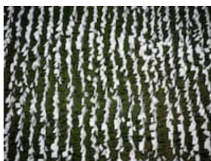
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